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ABSTRACT

Criticism of the role of the media in the dissemination of drug abuse information demonstrates a need for investigating the message characteristics of televised public service announcements criticizing the use of drugs. An analysis of anti-drug commercials telecast in Connecticut in December 1971 indicates that drug abuse messages are primarily telecast during "non-prime-time" periods. The messages generally contain little specific information, are not directed at identifiable audiences, and customarily use actors or sports celebrities as announcers. The message strategy is usually "fear appeal." The need for additional information about audiences of public service announcements and the actual effects of telecast drug abuse messages is apparent. (RN)

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TELEVISED DRUG APPEALS
A Content Analysis

by

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March 1972

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DRUG ABUSE INFORMATION RESEARCH PROJECT

DAIR Report #1

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This report is one of a series of descriptive and predictive studies into the cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to drug abuse information. Project DAIR (Drug Abuse Information Research), proposes to define dimensions of information seeking and utilization that relate to drug abuse. Investigations in this series develop and implement the instrumentation for a methodology which includes surveys, experimental manipulations, field experiments and modeling. One goal of the series is the development of a stochastic behavioral model which allows the prediction of drug use behavior consequent to specified exposure from drug abuse information.

Computer time for statistical analyses was provided through the Facilities of the University of Connecticut Computer Center and supported by National Science Foundation Grant GJ-9 to the Computer Center.

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Recently, the media have been criticized for fostering favorable attitudes toward illicit drug use. Vice President Spiro Agnew has blamed the music and broadcasting industries for promoting drug use through such songs as the Beatle's "With a Little Help From My Friends," and Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit."[1]

Within the communications industry itself, Richard Earle, Creative Supervisor for Grey Advertising, claimed that the media have been responsible for part of the current drug problem and that they should therefore be part of its solution. The Grey Agency was contracted by the National Institute of Mental Health to produce a series of broadcast and print messages about drug abuse. Relative to this campaign, Earle said:

> All the media must shoulder some of the blame for the proliferation of the drug scene. Art, music, and jargon have found their way into everyday use in our craft. The young person who seeks to reinforce his notion that "turning on" is part of the scene everywhere today, has powerful influences all around him. . . It is perhaps more than appropriate that a campaign prepared by a large advertising agency should be a step toward stemming that proliferation.[2]

This study is part of a series of investigations into the media and drug abuse information dissemination and utilization. It is a descriptive study focusing on <u>television</u> drug abuse campaigns because, in general, television is the medium of highest use and credibility.[3]

The importance of the mass media as a source of information about drugs has in general been overlooked. Frejer and others,[4] in a survey of three Canadian cities, reported that over half of the 12,554 junior and senior high students sampled cited the media as the most informative source from which one could learn

about drugs. In two cities, close to 50% of the students reported that it was the media that helped them decide marijuana was harmful. Kanter[5] investigated the role of televised pharmaceutical drug advertising. From ratings of the perceived impact of television advertising on drug abuse he found that adolescents and teenagers ranked the overall influence of television among the lowest of 15 influence sources. However, television was ranked as a high influence on proprietary drug use, and a moderate influence on friend's use of illicit drugs. O'Keefe[6] examined the effect of anti-smoking commercials and generally supported known claims about the effects of mass communication: those most likely to change attitudes and behavior were persons already inclined toward the behavior advocated (non-smokers) or those for whom the issue was not of great importance; behavior change did not occur among smokers for whom the issue was of high salience.

While these studies describe the role and impact of drug-related advertising on television, research into the message characteristics of such appeals is lacking. Persuasion research,[7] however, attests to the apparent impotence of highly fear arousing messages in changing attitudes when the issues are highly salient or ego-involving. A recent study[8] on traffic safety advertising on television found that scare tactics were usually ineffective ("It can't happen to me") and supports the idea that facts are more effective than fear tactics.

As a prelude to looking at media programming as an effects generator, this study examines public service announcements (PSA's) about drug abuse: which messages are broadcast, who sponsors them, what audiences are the apparently intended targets, and at what times they are presented. It is an attempt to gauge the extent of the public service commitment of the television industry to the drug abuse problem.

There have apparently been no previous content analyses of public service announcements. Perhaps this is attributable to the former lack of concern with this segment of a broadcaster's responsibility, both by licensees and by mass communication researchers. It seemed sufficient to televise Red Cross appeals just before the sign-off announcement, or whenever commercial availabilities were open. However, in light of public-group challenges to license renewals as well as greater service orientation by broadcasters, and in the context of the Federal Communications Commission's activities regarding drug lyrics, public service broadcasting takes on added importance. This is not only reflected in greater attention to minority programming but in concern over the media's responsibility whenever social problems demand national attention.

Due to the national priorities for containing drug abuse, an increase in the promulgation of drug abuse information might be expected. Also, if television is indeed exercising its ability to reach young people, and drug abuse in the U.S. is a "youth problem" as Richards and Langer[9] suggest, it would be expected that drug abuse PSA's would be broadcast during hours when youth are likely to attend to television. Since we are concerned with the credibility of the PSA's, the type of people that appear in the PSA's should also be examined, as well as the nature of the information presented.

Methods

The content analysis was performed primarily in the Hartford, Connecticut Metropolitan viewing area during the weeks of December 16-21 and December 26-31, 1971.[10] The three commercial networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) were monitored as well as all independent television stations in Hartford, Boston, and Providence, Rhode Island. Additional independents in Florida and California were also monitored.

Coding was performed from sign-on and sign-off by twenty-two coders working in six hour blocks.

A coding instrument was employed, consisting of five pages and covering 19 variables.[11] These included items about the location and times of appearance of the PSA, the sponsor, the type of people depicted, the apparent audience intended, the physical and social effects of drug abuse shown or discussed, and the paraphernalia discussed, shown, or shown being used.[12]

All coders participated in a briefing session during which coding procedures, categories, and potential ambiguities were discussed. Depending upon the item, final intercoder agreements based on overlapping coding of approximately 5% of total television time, ranged from 79% to 95%. Least agreement existed as to the total number of characters in a PSA, probably due to the amount of estimation necessary whenever groups were shown.

Results

A total of 85 presentations of 32 different drug abuse messages were coded during the sampling period. The National Clearinghouse for Drug Abuse Information sponsored 63.5% of the PSA's representing 15 different messages, while 7% were sponsored by the Advertising Council (3 different messages), 6% (2 PSA's) were sponsored by State Governments; the remaining 24% of the drug abuse presentations (12 PSA's) were sponsored by 8 other organizations. Table 1 displays the time of presentations of the PSA by type. Note that three of the 32 PSA's accounted for 52% of the total presentations. These three (all produced by the National Clearinghouse for Drug Abuse Information) were:

1. A professional or college football player is introduced and talks about the value of not abusing drugs. This format is constant across eight versions of this message starring different sports celebrities.

2. David Janssen and a number of celebrities and noncelebrities discuss their concern with the drug abuse problem.

3. Hal Holbrook is set in a desolate jail cell, apparently overseas, talking about penalties for drug abuse in other countries. He instructs parents to inform their children of these laws.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 shows the relationship between apparent target audience for the drug abuse message and time of presentation. Of the total, 18% were considered youth-oriented since they discussed drug use among youth and made explicit presentation appeals to the young viewer. Another 33% of the messages were perceived to be about adult drug use (such as the PSA "Neighborhood Junkie" depicting a housewife who relies upon tranquilizers and diet pills) or contained an explicit presentation appeal aimed at parents. The remaining 49% of the PSA's were coded "general" because they presented general drug information, and/or made presentations to a nonspecific audience.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Note that 65% of the PSA's observed over a 14 day period were presented between 10:00 A.M. and 7:00 P.M. The data also show that none of the explicit youth oriented PSA's, and only 6% of the general PSA's were broadcast during prime evening hours. In other words, 94% of the PSA's were shown during periods of generally lower audience attendance. Also, 70% of the drug abuse PSA's directed at parents were shown between 3:00 P.M. and 7:00 P.M., a time inconvenient for many working people and a time housewives are conceivably busy with family matters and may be less likely to attend.

TABLE 1

Drug Abuse Message Type and Time of Presentation

TIME	PSA #1 Football Players	PSA #2 David Janssen et. al.	PSA #3 Hal Holbrook	Other PSA's	TOTAL
Sign-on to 10:00 A.M.	0.0% (0)	18.8% (3)	8.3% (1)	14.6% (6)	11.8% (10)
10:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M.	25.0% (4)	31.3% (5)	16.7% (2)	26.8% (11)	25.9% (22)
3:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M.	75.0% (12)	18.8% (3)	50.0% (6)	29.3% (12)	38.8% (33)
7:00 P.M. to 10:30 P.M.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	8.3% (1)	9.8% (4)	5.9% (5)
10:30 P.M. to 11:30 P.M.	0.0% (0)	12.5% (2)	8.3% (1)	9.8% (4)	8.2% (7)
11:30 P.M. to Sign-off	0.0% (0)	18.8% (3)	8.3% (1)	9.8% (4)	9.4% (8)
	100.0% (16)	100.0% (16)	100.0% (12)	100.0% (41)	100.0% (85)

TABLE 2

Apparent Target Audience of Drug Abuse Messages
and Time of Presentation

TIME	AUDIENCE			TOTAL
	Youth	Parents	General	
Sign-on to 10:00 A.M.	6.3% (1)	14.3% (4)	11.9% (5)	11.8% (10)
10:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M.	46.6% (7)	17.9% (5)	23.8% (10)	25.9% (22)
3:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M.	33.3% (5)	42.9% (12)	38.1% (16)	38.8% (33)
7:00 P.M. to 10:30 P.M.	0.0% (0)	7.1% (2)	7.1% (3)	5.9% (5)
10:30 P.M. to 11:30 P.M.	6.3% (1)	3.6% (1)	11.9% (5)	8.2% (7)
11:30 P.M. to Sign-off	6.3% (1)	14.3% (4)	7.1% (3)	9.4% (8)
	100.0% (15)	100.0% (28)	100.0% (42)	100.0% (85)

Message characteristics that were coded included the race of the apparently intended audience, the race of main characters and the age of the main characters. Only 6% of the PSA's were explicitly directed toward blacks (e.g., they made appeals to "brothers and sisters" or other references to black people). Of the main characters in the ads, 12% of the PSA's had only black characters, while 15% of the PSA's had both black and white main characters. In terms of age, Table 2 shows that only a third of the drug abuse PSA's were explicitly oriented to parents; yet 58% of the PSA's had adult main characters (apparently over the age of 21), while 13% of the PSA's had main characters who were teenagers.

Station affiliation and program context were also coded, but since it was virtually impossible to determine which were local cutaways and which were network originations, PSA's could not accurately be attributed either to the network or the local outlet. In terms of representation, ABC outlets presented the least amount of drug abuse messages (24%), CBS affiliates presented a somewhat greater share (32%), while NBC outlets presented the greatest percentage of total drug abuse messages (38%). These figures must be qualified somewhat by a consideration of differences among networks in sports programming during the observation periods since over 16% of the drug abuse messages were broadcast during sporting events.

Other programming characteristics indicated that 8% of the messages occurred during variety shows (talk or musical variety shows), while 25% occurred during series. Almost 27% of the drug abuse messages were broadcast during station breaks. Table 3 compares message factors across PSA type and presentation. No

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

TABLE 3

Message Factors in Drug Abuse PSA's

Appeal	Ad Types (n=32)	Observations (n=85)
Statistics Presented	9.0% (3)	13.0% (11)
Paraphernalia Discussed or Shown	9.0% (3)	8.0% (7)
Social Effects Discussed	19.0% (6)	22.4% (19)
Physical Effects Discussed	28.0% (9)	20.0% (17)

statistics or factual information were presented in 87% of the PSA presentations. This figure seemingly contrasts with the Grey Advertising Agency's stated goal in drug abuse information dissemination as providing potential users with facts and information.[13] Allied to this is the finding that there was only minimal (8%) presentation of descriptions about drug paraphernalis.

Examination of the data indicates a fairly heavy reliance on discussing or showing the harmful effects of drug abuse, with 22% of the total presentations coded concentrating on harmful social effects and 20% emphasizing the harmful physical effects of abuse.

Table 4 shows the extent to which celebrities were involved in drug abuse messages. While only 6 PSA's involved movie or television actors, these six ads were shown an average of six times each (to account for 44% of the total observations coded). In addition, there were 8 messages involving football stars, which were shown an average of three times each.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

The following summary statements are evidenced by the data:

- over 90% of the drug abuse commercials observed were broadcast at times of typically lower attendance;
- 87% of the drug abuse PSA's presented only general information (i.e., no specific data, consummatory evidence or statistics were cited);
- 42% of all drug abuse commercials coded made reference to the harmful social and/or physical consequences of drug abuse;
- only 6% of the drug abuse PSA's were apparently explicitly oriented toward a black audience although blacks appeared in 27% of the messages; approximately 18% of the PSA's were explicitly directed at young people;
- 67% of the drug abuse messages observed involved appeals by celebrities.

TABLE 4

Celebrities in Drug Abuse Messages

Type	Ad Types (n=32)	Observations (n=85)
Movie/TV Stars	18.6% (6)	43.5% (37)
Sports Figures	25.0% (8)	23.5% (20)
	43.6%	67.0%

Although it was anticipated that drug abuse advertising might be presented primarily during times of high youth attendance, this frequently was not the case. Most of the drug abuse messages were presented during "class C" time slots (from sign-on to 4:30 P.M. and after midnight) or during "class B" time slots (4:30 to 6:30 P.M.), rather than during the more optimum "class AA" evening prime time hours. Thus it appears that drug abuse messages are customarily presented during times either when slot availabilities are open or when the cost of displacing paid commercials would be minimal. This is no doubt the case with other PSA's as well, although further inquiry into this apparently neglected area could establish patterns of PSA presentation for comparison purposes. Altogether, however, the data appear to reflect a tendency to fulfill "public service" broadcast requirements in the crisis areas (such as drug abuse) with information presented at less than optimal times leading, of necessity, to less than optimal exposure and what may then be a lessened potential for effect.

Of additional concern is the tendency to present nonspecific, nondirected drug abuse messages to what is apparently presumed to be a heterogeneous audience with nonspecific informational needs. Specific facts were included in less than 15% of the total presentations observed. Despite the apparent needs of at least two target groups (parents and drug-naive youth) for rather specific data about effects, hazards and danger signals,[14] such information was generally not available in the televised presentations. In order to obtain such information, the viewer is typically instructed to write the National Clearinghouse for Drug Abuse Information. The presentation of a 5-10 second tagline request to write for additional information as a source of sufficient motivation to actually write is of course suspect. What is seemingly needed is a convenient source capable of providing the sorts of information which the target groups most need.

Some sort of systematic analysis of audience informational requirements should be a prerequisite to information dissemination if optimal effectiveness is the goal. A general "awareness" of drug abuse as a societal danger may not suffice for those most directly concerned with the problem. While additional media sources can and should provide supplementary information, the fact remains that, as mentioned before, television provides the medium of greatest overall credibility and hence could be utilized as a viable information source.

Allied to the lack of specific informational content is the lack of apparent audience direction, again perhaps reflecting limited preliminary audience analysis. The inability of the mass media to convert or substantially alter the attitudes and beliefs of a mass audience has been well documented.[15] It is acknowledged that the mass media do not provide an effective means of influencing a mass public via some single set of campaign messages. Perhaps some of this lack of effect lies in the inability of a mass directed appeal to provide the sort of personally relevant information which advertisers[16] and marketing theorists[17] suggest as a requirement for change. If indeed the progression of media development is oriented toward becoming more specialized, as some theorists[18] have claimed, a more appropriate orientation for maximal effectiveness might be toward specifically directed drug abuse messages. Information might more profitably be directed as specified targets within the "mass" audience, thus providing an interrelated information system with a number of specific goals geared to the apparent needs, attitudes and knowledge of the particular receiver subpopulations.

Interacting with the orientation and content of the message is the credibility of the source of that message. Ample research evidence points to the importance of the audience's perceptions of the source as a determinant of response to persuasive messages.[19] The reliance of the drug abuse messages coded upon

celebrities as credible sources also underscores this factor. Still, the question remains regarding the actual perceived credibility of the sources typically employed by such messages. Berlo, Lemert and Mertz[20] emphasize the multidimensional nature of credibility, with "safety" (trustworthiness) and "qualification" (apparent expertise) being the major components. While targeted audience subpopulations conceivably respond positively to actors and sports celebrities as trustworthy individuals, their necessary qualification to speak about drugs may be suspect in some eyes. Regardless of the sources employed, however, a reliance on source credibility as a persuasive technique further necessitates a prerequisite audience analysis. Certainly not all sources are equally credible to all people. Some sources may prove to be satisfactory for dealing with adult parents, but not for present drug users or their nonuser peers. It is, however, to the audience that one must look for perceptions of credibility, and hence it is apparently to the audience that designers of drug abuse messages must look if their stated goals are to be realized.

One additional message strategy employed in the messages observed is that of "fear appeal."[21] Over two-fifths of the drug abuse PSA's coded employed some form of threat regarding the harmful social and/or physical consequences of engaging in drug abuse. This can be an effective technique in certain instances, as Rosenstock[22] maintains. The use of such appeals relies heavily, however, on the assumption that the source is perceived to be highly credible. Without a high degree of perceived credibility, the effects of fear-arousing communications may, in fact, "boomerang" and lead to unintended results. Fear appeals also seem to be maximally effective, as Ray and Wilkie[23] report, among those audience segments who do not see the subject matter discussed as highly personally relevant. Thus it would appear that considerable care should be

exercised in the implementation of fear appeal strategies among various sub-populations (e.g., users; those leaning in the direction of drug use; those who do not perceive the source to be highly credible). This further emphasizes the seeming need for a more specifically oriented informational strategy and underscores the potential danger in failing to systematically examine the intended audience(s) prior to embarking on a persuasive strategy.

Summary

Due to the lack of an adequate data base regarding the mass media's role in the dissemination of public service information, an exploratory study was conducted in order to ascertain the quantitative and qualitative aspects of televised drug abuse advertising. These data provide information for future hypothesis-testing investigations into public service communications, a number of which were suggested in the discussion. The data also relate to knowledge regarding the availability of drug abuse information through television, a necessary precondition for audience awareness.

In general, drug abuse appeals were found to be telecast primarily during times of lower audience attendance (class C times). Such messages typically included little specific informational content, were not directed at identifiable audience segments, and customarily involved the use of actor or sport celebrities as sources and some type of fear appeal as a message strategy. The suitability of each of these techniques in the absence of audience data to support their utilization was discussed.

The data presented here are not intended to be and should not be interpreted as being a blanket criticism of drug abuse message producers or channel gatekeepers. What seems necessary at this stage is the development of an informational base regarding the target audiences and the actual and potential effects

which mediated drug abuse information can generate among these groups. Message producers have apparently operated in the absence of concrete audience data. The acquisition of such information should provide for a greater optimization of informational strategies. With respect to media gatekeepers, what needs to be examined are the explicit or implicit decision criteria for selecting one appeal over another and for allotting time slots for presentation. A larger study of the information pool available to broadcasters and of the potential strengths and weaknesses of each type of appeal would not only provide data on an area of stated public concern largely neglected by researchers, but would also provide a scientific basis for message producers and disseminators to make decisions.

[1]Spiro T. Agnew, September 14, 1970, speech made at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas.

[2]Anon., "Ads Hitting at Drug Use go to Media," EDITOR AND PUBLISHER, 102:16, (September 6, 1969).

[3]See Bradley S. Greenberg, "Mass Media and Attitudes of the Urban Poor." Testimony to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, Washington, D. C., (1969); Walter Weiss, "Mass Communication," ANNUAL REVIEW OF PSYCHOLOGY, 22:309-336, (1971).

[4]D. Frejer, R. Smart, P. Whitehead, and L. LaForest, "Sources of Information About Drugs Among High School Students," PUBLIC OPINION QUARTERLY, 35:235-241, (1971).

[5]Donald L. Kanter, "Pharmaceutical Advertising and Youth: A Monograph Reporting Upon a Quantitative Pilot Study," MIMEO, (1970), reported in D. Checkman, "Why Do American Youth Use Illicit Drugs: A Review of Scientific Research," paper submitted to the Proprietary Association, (1972).

[6]M. Timothy O'Keefe, "Anti-smoking Commercials: A Study of Television Impact on Behavior," PUBLIC OPINION QUARTERLY, 35:242-248, (1971).

[7]See, for example, K. L. Higbee, "Fifteen Years of Fear Arousal: Research on Threat Appeals: 1953-1968," PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN, 72:426-444, (1969).

[8]K. E. Cook, and W. E. Ferguson, "What Do Teenagers Really Think of Traffic Safety," TRAFFIC QUARTERLY, 22:237-243, (1968).

[9]L. G. Richards, and J. H. Langer, "Drug-Taking in Youth," U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE, (1971).

[10]There were no significant differences between the number of drug abuse PSA's televised during either coding week.

[11]The instrument is available from the authors.

[12]While most of the variables were relatively straight-forward to code the effects variables were somewhat complex and defined as follows. The physically harmful or painful effects included a discussion or presentation of withdrawal, death, disease or "freaking out" due to drug abuse. Socially undesirable effects of drug abuse were indicated by the discussion or presentation of broken homes, loss of friends or love, loss of a job, and arrest or criminat records.

[13]Anon., ibid.; see also National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse, Marihuana: A Signal of Misunderstanding, GPO, 1972, for a discussion about the impact of alternative and often contradictory drug abuse information sources.

[14]See Gerhard J. Hanneman, "Dissemination of Drug Related Information," Drug Abuse Information Research Project Report, No. 3, University of Conn., (1972).

[15]For example, Joseph T. Klapper, The Effects of Mass Communication, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960).

[16]William D. Wells, W. C. Leavitt and M. McConville, "A Reaction Profile for TV Commercials," JOURNAL OF ADVERTISING RESEARCH, 11:11-17, (1971).

[17]J. A. Howard, and J. N. Sheth, "A Theory of Buyer Behavior. In Kassarjian and Robertson (eds.) Perspectives in Consumer Behavior, (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1968), 467-487.

[18]For example, J. C. Merrill, and R. L. Lowenstein, Media, Messages and Man (New York: David McKay, Inc., 1971).

[19]Higbee, ibid.

[20]David K. Berlo, J. B. Lemert, and R. J. Mertz, "Dimensions for Evaluating the Acceptability of Message Sources," PUBLIC OPINION QUARTERLY, 33:563-576, (1970).

[21]Carl I. Hovland, I. Janis and H. Kelley, Communication and Persuasion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

[22]I. W. Rosenstock, "Why People Use Health Services," MILLBANK MEMORIAL FUND QUARTERLY, 44:94-127, (1966).

[23]M. L. Ray, and W. L. Wilkie, "Fear: the Potential of an Appeal Neglected by Marketing," JOURNAL OF MARKETING, 34:54-62, (1970).